

Superfund issues stick around

10 HOURS AGO • BY JOHN RAY

Butte is ill-served by the EPA's and Montana Department of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) Superfund cleanup. Apart from these agencies allowing potentially harmful tailings dust to blow around town, serious Superfund problems still plague Butte.

MONTANA POLE PLANT

Because surface water, groundwater, soils and sediments at the Pole Plant are contaminated with highly toxic dioxins, the Pole Plant is one of the most dangerous of Butte Superfund sites. Sadly, the Pole Plant cleanup isn't working.

Dioxin poses a serious human health threat. There are no safe levels of exposure to dioxin. (EPA) Dioxin has been referred to as the "most toxic chemical known." (Hazardous Waste in America, Epstein, et. al.) Lethal effects of dioxin can be seen at very low exposure levels-a millionth of a gram can kill lab animals. Dioxin causes serious cancerous and non-cancerous health effects. (World Health Organization) The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences states that the "dangers of dioxin last for decades after initial exposure."

The EPA and DEQ promised that the dioxins and other contaminants found at the site would be treated and cleaned up. The DEQ and EPA have reneged on this promise. Although the EPA says that dioxin's toxicity exists for a very long period of time, MDEQ and EPA have largely abandoned treatment in favor of containment, leaving the threat in place.

However, the current containment remedy is failing. Dioxin is still being released. The Pole Plant's groundwater treatment system still allows for significant discharge of dioxin into Silver Bow Creek-100 times the current dioxin surface water standard. Such discharges will continue for decades. DEQ's own discharge study found that DEQ's planned cleanup approach would still allow dioxin to be discharged into Silver Bow Creek. DEQ has ignored this problem and continues to implement a non-protective cleanup. Why was a sub-par cleanup approach implemented?

Citizens have a right to know if and why government is not doing what it said it would do to protect human health and the environment. Yet, DEQ's public outreach and involvement is non-existent.



Contrary to what was promised regarding community involvement, DEQ has failed to provide the public with timely information about the problems with the cleanup. The public deserves answers about the Pole Plant.

LEAD CLEANUP

Almost a year ago, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) toughened the standard for "acceptable" blood lead levels in children below the age of six. The new lead level standard is 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. The old standard, which is the "action level" used in Butte's lead abatement program (part of the EPA's Superfund cleanup for Butte) for children below the age of six, was 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. The current EPA blood "action levels" for Butte are based on the old, non-protective 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood standard.

An article entitled "Lead Poisoning Toll Revised to One in 38 U.S. Children" (Montana Standard, 4/9/2013) concluded that the new CDC standard doubled the number of children in the U.S. that are believed to have lead poisoning. Children in low-income families are particularly impacted by lead poisoning. According to the article, lead exposure can reduce IQ and "harm a child's brain, kidneys and other organs."

EPA has been asked whether or not the Butte lead "action levels" would be changed to reflect the CDC's tougher, more protective, standards. Citizens were told that EPA was "looking at" the Butte lead "action levels." Almost one year later, EPA is still "looking." Nothing has been done.

Why hasn't EPA changed the current lead "action levels" to reflect the new tougher standard? Why is EPA dragging its feet?

BERKELEY PIT

We are fast approaching the time when lime treated water from the Pit will be released into Silver Bow Creek. Such releases could lead to carbonate scaling (the white powder at the bottom of a tea pot) of the entire streambed, creating significant problems for the Creek. EPA promised to develop a solution to the scaling problem. So far, EPA has done nothing.

These above-discussed, unresolved problems are a threat to public health and the environment and a drag on Butte's economic development. EPA and DEQ need to fix the problems.

— John W. Ray, Ph.D., is a professor of political science and public policy at Montana Tech. His views are his own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Montana Tech.